

"Leiderkranz"

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"Living Lore" series.

Francis Donovan, Thomaston, Conn.

January 10, 1939 "Liederkranz" Early Gristmills, Industries, Transportation.
Reminiscences.

Mr. Botsford has made one of his frequent trips "down town" in his small car, and I find him in conversation with Mr. August Birkenberger, another of the little band of Clock Company

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pensioners, in front of the quarters of the Liederkrantz society, of which Mr. Birkenbirger is steward.

Mr. Botsford hails me: "C'mere young feller. This feller" (he explains to Mr. Birkenbirger, "is writing up some local history and he wants to know something about the Liederkrantz. You know when it was organized, August?"

Mr. Birkenbirger: "Well, it was going strong when I come here in eighteen eighty-six. It had a big membership then. None of the old fellas is alive. I belong for more than fifty years. I look it up for you sometime, we got the books upstairs."

Mr. Botsford: "You'd oughta have seen that flag they had. One of the finest American flags I ever see, hey August? Remember the time they moved the nigger soldiers from Bronxville Texas to Ticonderoga, and they had flags out all along the line of march? The captains said it was the finest flag they ever see. What's that? Why, it was back in 1910 or 12 -- these colored soldiers was raisin' too much hell down around the border, and they decided to move 'em. All the troops was colored men except the officers. It took 'em two-three hours to come through town, with their chuck wagons and all. Didn't have no automobiles. Marched all the way.

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"Say, where was you going when I called you?"

I reply that I was on my way to pay him a visit.

"That's fine, you get in my car, and I'll show you one or two places of interest around here I bet you never see before."

We say goodbye to Mr. Birkenbirger, who promises to look up the history of his club in the old records. Mr. Botsford drives his car slowly around some of the old streets of Thomaston, pointing out the sites of the old blacksmith shops, long-forgotten grist mills,

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the foundations overgrown and barely discernible, vacant lots where once flourished tiny but busy "shops," farms now occupied by foreign families but once the property of old Yankee families whose names stud the early town records. All the while he keeps up a running fire of comment.

"Here," says he, indicating a handsome, renovated farmhouse on the Morris Road, the property of a wealthy New Yorker. "Here's where old Whiplash Munson lived. Place has been improved a good deal since his time, by the looks of it. Whiplash used to hunt woodchucks and made whiplashes from their hides. Made the finest whips you could ask for. He was a peculiar old character. Here's Robertses Mill down here, you can just see the foundations, and here's the old Roberts homestead. Here's where old Ed Stevens used to live, lived to be 103 years old.

"We turn off here, and go up towards Northfield. Used to be all houses down where the reservoir is now. Road was hardly wider than a cart track. There's where old Captain Simeon Smith lived.

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"He was another queer character. Sold liquor. Not that there was anything queer about that. But he used to always wear a big long linen duster, with a red bandana handkerchief hangin' out of the pocket, and a straw hat, winter and summer. He'd look at you through a little peekhole, before he let you in where he kept the liquor. Sold somethin' called 'methignon' 'twas made with honey. Cost only three cents a glass, or a shot, or whatever you want to call it. Take a few drinks this afternoon, and got drunk, and take a drink of water tomorrow mornin' and you're drunk all over again. That's the kind of stuff that was.

"Take that road, and 'twill bring you out into what they call White's Woods, up near Litchfield. The old Shepaug railroad runs through there. Used to call it the 'Tri-Weekly' -- run a train today and try to get back tomorrow. Used to say the brakeman set mushrat traps along the way. He'd get out the front part of the train and tend to 'em, and then catch

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the rear end as it came around the corner -- the road was that crooked. They said if you were on the first coach, you could look back almost any time and see the red tail light on the caboose.

"Well, we're comin' down into Northfield. How do you like that view? Ever see any better scenery than that? Talk about your Mohawk trail.

"I like to get out into the country -- always did. Many's the time after workin' in the shop all day, I'd come out here with a horse and buggy. It's beautiful in the summer time -- beautiful. And I hardly ever missed a Sunday drivin' in the country, when my aunt was alive. Had a car ever since nineteen nineteen. This old car ain't so bad for six years old, is it? Never had the bottom off'n it.

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"This here's the Weber place. He used to drive a horse into town every day, up until last year. Now I see he's got a car. This used to be the old Morse place. Now some Polish, or something like that, has got hold of it.

"Here's where the Gilberts lived. He went to Winsted and started the Gilbert clock company. And one of the family left money for a library for Northfield, and that's it in that house right over across the way. Notice that monument. That's got the same names on it as the one up in Plymouth. Northfield was a part of Plymouth durin' the Civil War, you see."

We descend the hill past the old Knife shop, the history of which occupies Mr. Botsford for the remaining mile of the homeward trip. As he halts the car for as to get out in the center of town, he fires this parting shot:

"The country's mighty fine, but don't get the idea that I ever would have wanted to live out there. No farmin' for me. I'd rather have worked in the shop all my life, just like I did. 'Course it's all right if you ain't got nothing to do, and you got a car and a radio, and a telephone, and the roads are good.

"Well, I'll see you again."

I go into the firehouse, where like Odenwald and Mr. MacCurrie, occupying their chairs by the window as usual, are engaged in dual reminiscence. One thing, as usual, leads to another. They begin by discussing the prolonged absence from the group of Mr. Joseph Reichenbach and proceed to fond recollection of the gustatory delights of the boarding house kept by Mrs. Reichenbach years ago, "over in the Cotton row."

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MR. ODENWALD: "I never see a woman like her. She'd stand behind you and heap your plate full, and when you was finished with it, she'd be there with another big helping. You had to eat it, too, or she'd be sore. I never had a very big appetite, but she seemed to think I ought to eat as much as Billy Smith. He worked outside shoveling coal all day."

MR. MACCURRE: "How much board she charge you, Henry?"

MR. ODENWALD: "Not more than six or seven dollars, I forget just what it was. Board and room, too."

MR. MACCURRE: "I was boardin' out them days, too, but it wasn't no such place as that. I was choppin' wood up in the four corners. A bunch of us was sleepin' in a cabin up there nights. We got good grub all right, but nothin' fancy. Mostly stews and the like o' that."

MR. ODENWALD: "She was a fine woman."

MR. MACCURRE: "Joe met her over in Glasgow. He worked there one time for the Singer Sewin' Machine people."

MR. ODENWALD: "He was a fine clockmaker, Joe was. For years him and old man Ebner made all the models down there. Now they got about twenty-five workin' on them."

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MR. MACCURRE (who keeps a sharp eye out for tramps seeking lodgings in the adjacent town hall building). "There goes another Weary Willie. I doubt he'll get in. I think Bob's gone home."

MR. ODENWALD: "Remember the wood pile they used to have out there? They used to make 'em chop so much wood for their breakfast." 6 * 6 *-

MR. MACCURRE: "They don't give 'em breakfast any more."

MR. ODENWALD: "I remember one time Pink Wilson was janitor, just about this time of the year, it was. I met him one morning, he says, 'Well, Henry it's a fine, cold morning, I'll bet my lodgers are out there getting warm on the woodpile.' We went down and took a look and there wasn't a damn one of them out there. Pink went in, and there they were all in the boiler room getting warm. I tell you the air was blue there for a few minutes while Pink was talkin'."

MR. MACCURRE glances up at the town hall clock and decides it is getting on towards supper time. He communicates this bit of information to Mr. Odenwald, who agrees. Both reach for overcoats and hats on the wall racks.